

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000629

SIPDIS

CAIRO FOR MAXSTADT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/27/2013

TAGS: [EPET](#) [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [PHUM NI](#)

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: CONCERN FOR CRISIS IN THE DELTA

REF: A) ABUJA 555

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter. Reasons:
1.5 (B & D).

1. (C) SUMMARY: During a March 26 evening meeting, President Obasanjo, Ambassador Jeter and British High Commissioner Philip Thomas discussed the ongoing crisis in the oil-producing Niger Delta. Jeter and Thomas expressed concern about the implications of a continuing crisis on stability and on Nigeria's economy. In the face of the violence that has already taken place there, Jeter urged restraint by Nigerian military units deployed to the area to contain the Ijaw militants. Obasanjo inveighed against these militants for killing several soldiers, commenting that he would "do what I have to do as President" to restore law and order. Despite the air of toughness and emotion that permeated this meeting, GON action has been relatively measured thus far, consistent with the line expressed in the Ambassador's earlier discussion with the President (Reftel). END SUMMARY.

2. (C) During a late night March 26 discussion of the upheaval affecting the key oil producing areas in Delta State, Obasanjo explained that "troops with armor" had been ordered into the area, and that the Army and Navy would do everything necessary to ensure security on Nigeria's waterways. Accusing Ijaw militants of killing four soldiers, Obasanjo condemned them as "criminals," and said they would have to answer for their misdeeds. As Head of State, it was his duty to restore order. Jeter and Thomas expressed concern that the conflict, if not properly handled, could spill over into the entire Delta. Given the loss of life and property destruction that has already occurred, Ambassador Jeter counseled that the Nigerian military show restraint and professionalism in handling the local militants.

3. (C) Clearly agitated and angered, Obasanjo bristled that he would "do what I have to do as President." Obasanjo asked rhetorically, "What should I do?" He then expressed his displeasure with the cutoff of security assistance, something he did not do when initially informed about the decision several weeks ago.

4. (C) Obasanjo rebuffed the notion that the violence was politically motivated, asserting instead that illegal oil bunkering was at the heart of the matter. He claimed to have removed the top Naval commander in Warri, as well as his deputy for collusion in the illegal bunkering. Obasanjo then stated that Delta State Governor James Ibori had promised to apprehend those responsible for killing the soldiers; if Ibori did not produce the suspects, Obasanjo declared, "then we will go in and find them."

5. (C) Meeting Minister of Defense Danjuma the following day, BHC Thomas was treated to an even more emotional encore. According to Thomas, Danjuma "blew up." "They killed four of our soldiers," Danjuma repeatedly said, "and we must do what we have to do." Danjuma chided Thomas by asking how he could offer advice on the Delta region, "given what you are doing in Iraq."

6. (C) COMMENT: Obasanjo knows that he is in a delicate position at the worst of all conceivable times -- the eve of elections. On the one hand, he wants to end this crisis quickly to get downstream oil facilities back on line before the economy feels the pinch. Taking strong action to punish the soldiers'

killers and restore the authority of the army is added incentive to talk tough and perhaps move quickly. However, Obasanjo also knows that an aggressively offensive strategy could produce another Odi or the Zaki-Biam, a development that could dim his electoral chances and further diminish Nigeria internationally.

17. (C) COMMENT CONT. This will be a complex dilemma for Obasanjo. A key will be figuring out what exactly the Ijaw militants want. After taking control of this key oil producing area, it seems implausible that they will drop their weapons and simply hand themselves over to the authorities. More to the point, much depends on the leeway Obasanjo feels he has to resolve this issue. This has been a stiff challenge to GON authority; the militants have bested some of his soldiers and scared away international oil firms; by possession of key oil installations, have held the country's economy to ransom. Obasanjo cannot easily swallow a deal that allows the culprits to walk away. However, if the perpetrators know they will be severely punished, they have little incentive to give up. Resolution of crisis lies in Obasanjo's ability to identify an out for both sides.

18. (C) COMMENT CONT. Last, speculation is rife about who is actually behind this crisis. For many, this challenge looks too organized and strong to have been entirely the work of local authors. Some people point the finger at Delta Governor Ibori. Many others see even more distant and powerful hands, including former Head of State Babangida, in the mix. They believe Babangida and his ilk stoked this turmoil as part of a larger plan to create enough unrest that would scuttle the elections. (Septel will provide a more detailed analysis of these points.)

JETER